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## Screen Culture: A Global History : By Richard Butsch

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## BOOK REVIEW

*Screen Culture: A Global History*. By Richard Butsch (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press. 308 pp. £18.99).

Richard Butsch, Professor Emeritus of Sociology, American Studies, and Film and Media Studies, defines *screen culture* as media that “are about images more than language, a modern form of visual culture” (2). The media that rely primarily on sound and audio are excluded from it. In addition, screen media often implies moving images. These media are traditionally film and television, but also include different forms of digital media nowadays. As the subtitle promises, the book provides the historical synthesis of the global, image-centred modern media.

The approach is indeed global insofar as it offers media historical accounts from areas other than only America (usually the U.S., but also, to a lesser degree, Canada) and Europe (predominantly the UK, but also Germany and France). Notes from Chinese, Indian, Egyptian, African, Asian and Latin American screen culture histories are included, but since the modern media are Western cultural, social and especially commercial inventions, Hollywood and American television are a major focus of the book. The approach of the overview is both chronological and geographical: a history from film to digital screens on the one hand and a history of spatial differences in media development on the other.

It is obvious that, when writing a global history about a topic, you have to make choices since you cannot include all the cultures of the world in your account. Butsch is justified in focusing on colonial India with its Bollywood, and to zoom in on Egypt as the leading film industry in the Arab world; his decision to elevate Latin American television culture with its telenovelas also makes sense. Overall, however, these accounts of global screen culture are more or less subordinated to the story of American cultural and economic hegemony. There are reasons to adopt such a framework, but other nuances could have been provided. For instance, Eastern European screen cultures were rather different from that of the UK's during the Cold War era yet there are largely absent here.

The undeniable strength of the book lies in its social historical study of different global screen cultures in modern times. This is obviously due to the background of the author. The synthesis of sociological analyses of audiences worldwide provides an educated account of the role of media cultures in the

everyday lives of people around the globe. This includes the rich contextualization of various phenomena: economic, consumerist, nationalistic, colonial and political factors behind the developments of screen media.

For instance, Butsch's analysis encompasses a wide range of subjects: how working-class and peasant audiences remodelled the movie theatres they attended; how their readings of the films differed from middle-class audiences; and how upper-middle class people preferred to separate the TV-set from daily activities, whereas it was embedded in the everyday socializing of lower-class families in the early years of the medium. Another example shows how soap operas resonated among audiences across a wide range of cultures when people navigate the similar family and neighbourhood situations that are depicted on screen. Overall, emphasizing how screen media changed peoples' use of time, and how they have brought the outside world into remote communities, is a fruitful and well-expressed line of analysis. (On the other hand, often these are not specifically the results of screen media, but a product of media history more broadly.)

The decision to begin the book with the invention of cinema does raise questions about chronology. What about phantasmagoria (magic lantern theatre shows) and (cylinder and moving) panoramas? Why have "pre-cinematic" spectacles not been included in the book? These Victorian forms of entertainment and education were not only "media archaeological" curiosities, but widely consumed cultural forms—together with other popular entertainment of the era: variety, vaudeville, café-concerts and café-chantants, which Butsch mentions (46–47). Why the book starts from the beginning of film exhibitions in the mid-1890s has not, however, been sufficiently justified.

Defining the end of the period in focus, that is our digital screen culture, is also problematic. Since ubiquitous digital media have had the capacity to include pictures and moving images since the introduction of web 2.0., at the latest, basically all computer and internet-based communication is also "screen culture." Because Butsch argues that whereas initially text-based digital communication is nowadays screen culture in many ways, he also expands his focus to discuss such disparate issues as data gathering, surveillance and social media, where pictures and videos are only part of the story. One wonders whether concentrating on only on image- (e.g., Instagram) and video- (e.g., YouTube) based social media platforms would have sharpened the analyses.

*Screen Media* is primarily an overview. It uses broadly media-historical research done around the world, offering a rich account of the topic. However, it lacks a theoretical scholarly analysis of the role of screen media in history. A concluding chapter with figures or tables would have helped the reader to understand the role of screen media in modern global history. Nevertheless, the book is a well-written and well-structured account and hence suitable as a textbook in history and communication studies.

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